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XXV.—THE PROSE DIALOGUE OF THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE RESTORATION

Literary historians, in characterizing the pamphlet literature of the English Civil War and the early years of the Restoration have, as a rule, contented themselves with the statement that much of the prose of the period was written in dialogue. It is the purpose of this paper to give some idea of the varying popularity of the dialogue during the period from 1640 to 1700, to characterize the commonest type more precisely than has been customary, and briefly to suggest its possible relation to English predecessors and to foreign works, ancient and contemporary.

After an investigation in which the large number of titles gathered from a variety of sources has been greatly reduced by the elimination of all verse dialogues and all others marked by a strongly dramatic quality, it is at last possible to determine the years when the prose dialogue was most popular.¹ From a careful tabulation of 1,500 dialogues dated before 1750 we learn that the times of

¹ Allowance must, of course, be made for lack of continuity in our sources of information. The superior thoroughness of the Thomason Catalogue (1640-1661) and the Term Catalogue (1668-1709) as compared to the Stationers' Register, which covers the entire period from 1554-1708, makes natural some increase in the totals for the years which they cover. It is not surprising to see a sharp advance from 1640 to 1645, and a sharp decline from 1660 to 1665. But not all the irregularities can be thus accounted for. From 1645 to 1655 there is a decided falling off, and in the following half decade a considerable revival of production, all in the Thomason period; while the whole record of the second burst of popularity can be traced strictly within the limits of the Term Catalogue.

excess production were years of political excitement: 1641-2, 1660, 1680-1. In the year 1641 50 dialogues appeared; in 1642, 24; in 1660, 24; in 1680, 25; in 1681, 40; and yet, excluding these years, the average production is less than ten.

These temporary increases in publication were furthermore accompanied by a rise in the percentage of purely political dialogues. Although this percentage is high all through the two decades from 1640 to 1660, it rises in 1642 to 68%, in 1660 to 70%, and in 1641 to 76%. Even more striking is the situation in 1681. Here a percentage of 72 is attained, although in the years from 1660 to 1680 political dialogues had formed a bare 20% of the whole.

From these facts it is evident that in the larger periods of production, political dialogues formed a great part of the whole, and, in fact, that the increase in the high years was almost wholly political.

Now, what was the character of these dialogues? The typical product may be characterized in several ways. To begin with, it was almost always short. Many times it was printed on a single sheet, not infrequently on one side of a sheet. In this form it was well adapted to wide distribution. It could be disposed of for little or nothing, it could be got rapidly into circulation, and it lent itself to purposes of display. Again, it had as a rule but two speakers, differentiated rather by the views they held or the doctrines they expounded than by the details of characterization. Because the dialogue was a convenient instrument for setting in opposition the views or doctrines which, to the man in the street, were characteristic of trades or professions, these two characters are frequently representatives of classes or parties. L'Estrange's *Observer* (1681-1684), most famous of the periodicals

of the time, has as speakers in its dialogues, Whig and Tory, Whig and Observer, Courantier and Whig, Courantier and Trimmer, and finally Observer and Trimmer. Moreover, even where both speakers are of the same occupation, interest centers in the topics discussed, not in the men themselves.

In the numerous instances where the aim is to attack individuals and where prominent figures of the time appear as characters, there is much personal satire; but usually it is built upon the acts of the victims, or, if disaster has perchance overtaken them, directed at their present plight. Rarely is there an attempt to reflect personal foibles in speeches put into the mouths of characters. Public men like Cromwell, Strafford, and Laud were often accused, openly, or by innuendo, of acts or designs dangerous to the state. Sometimes the proportion of truth in such pamphlets was considerable, but as a class they were given to exaggeration and unrestrained invective.

The two most hated men in England during the early years of the Civil War were, without much question, William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford. In a work entitled, "The Poets' Knavery Discovered, in all their lying Pamphlets, wittily and very ingeniously composed—" (1641) the author says that "there have been above three hundred lying pamphlets printed to my credible enumeration." Among these the author enumerates "Dialogue between him and the Lord's grace of Canterbury," "Dialogue between Dr. Cosins and a fellow of his college," "A Dialogue betwixt the King of France and Spain."

The reaction came in the early years of the Restoration, when the pent-up energies of the Royalists spent themselves in vilification of all the leaders of the Cromwellian

régime. Dialogues of ghosts had been popular for some time, and the idea of a dialogue between "the Ghost of Charles I, late King of England, and Oliver, the late usurping Protector," particularly appealed to the popular fancy. Just so there were conferences between Oliver and his wife, Oliver and his son Richard, Oliver and his faithful lieutenant, the Reverend Hugh Peters, while Lambert, Bradshaw, Vane, Joyce, Tichburn and Ireton, Haslerig all were assaulted individually and collectively.

In such dialogues as these, and, indeed, in a large proportion of the entire product, the tone was satirical and humorous. Ludicrous details were seized upon with avidity. Rough jests abounded. There was a deal of rough and tumble banter, of brisk exchange of witticisms. Statesmen were made to berate one another like fishwives, or quarrel like children, the humour of the piece appearing in the very inappropriateness of the epithets. The tone of these sheets may be gathered from one specimen aimed at Laud—"The Bishop's Potion: Or a Dialogue between the Bishop and his Physician; wherein he desireth the Doctor to have a Care of his Body, and to preserve him from being let Blood in the Neck, when the sign is in Taurus" (1641). The bishop having complained of a feeling of heaviness, the doctor administers an emetic, remarking that "there are certain raw Crudities, that lie heavy and undigested upon your Stomach which will, without Remedy, and that speedily, ascend on high, until it stifle and suffocate your Grace." Thereupon the patient brings up in succession, evidence of his connivance at "the tobacco patent, the Book of Pastimes on the Sunday which he caused to be made, a star-chamber order against Mr. Prynne, Mr. Burton, and Dr. Bastwicke, the Instruments creating absentee clergymen" (whose work was

done by Curates), "The Book of Canons." When the Mitre follows, he admits relief.

Sometimes, in the effort to win converts for parties, a more serious tone was adopted, and the giving of political information substituted for mere raillery. When this was the scheme, one speaker was not infrequently a countryman and the other from the city, or the one a mere citizen, and the other some person possessed of peculiar opportunities to acquire information. Frequently two fictitious characters discussed the latest news, as where a Cavalier and a Convert discuss the intrigues of the Queen to bring in the Papacy, the attempt to make Oxford a stronghold of Catholicism, or the double dealing of the King; or where a Citizen and a Country Gentleman exchange views regarding the Guild Hall trouble, "the Skirmish at S. Paul's," and "the passages at the Sessions house." Naturally, the lion's share of the talking is likely to fall to the informer. These news sheets bear an unquestionable relation to the early periodical, and, in particular, to the newspaper extra.

In the time of Sir Roger L'Estrange and the Popish Plot, such conversations were often loaded down with quotations and references to documents. The conversations might be jocular at times, and highly colloquial always, but the purpose was far more than mere amusement. L'Estrange was a shrewd and powerful man, uncommonly skillful in meeting the charges of numerous bitter enemies—and his liberal use of the dialogue proves the esteem in which it was held.

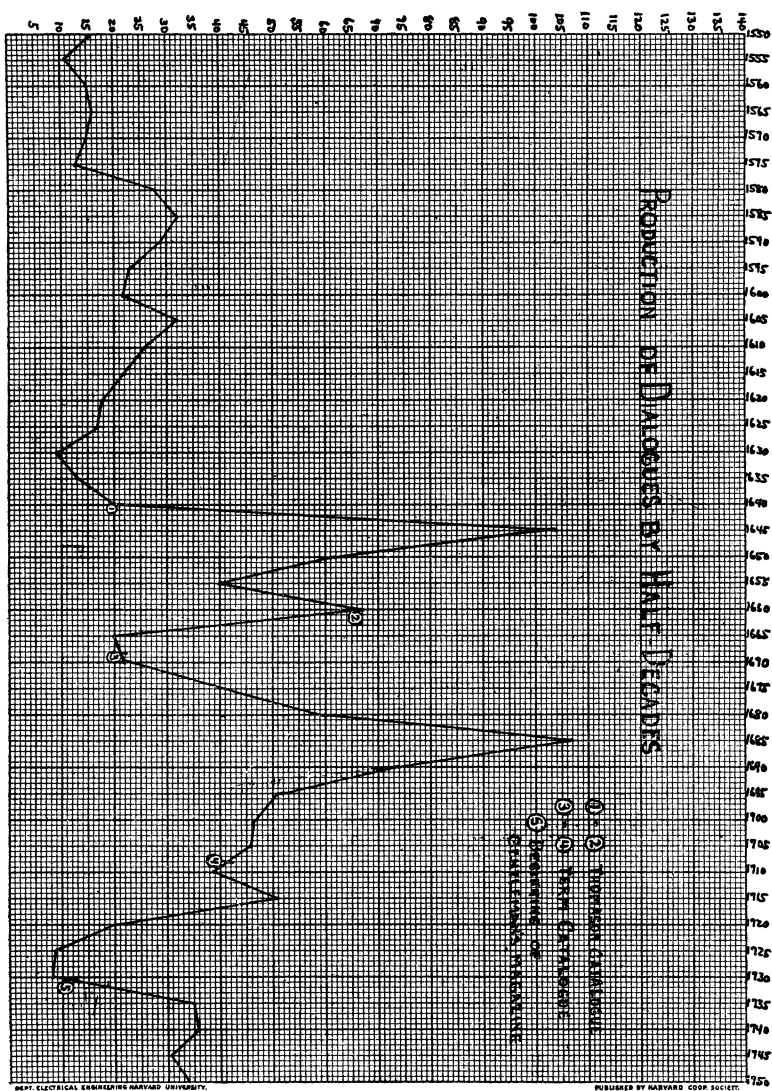
Almost never was the purpose of the dialogue anything but utilitarian. Its object, to defeat or discomfit an antagonist, might be gained in various ways, now serious, now jocular; by satire, personal or general. The aim of the political dialogue was, however, rarely deliberately

artistic. In a piece designed for the man on the street, such labor would have seemed misdirected.

Of the non-political dialogues of the period, though their number is small, much might be said. As I have shown elsewhere² the dialogue of the Commonwealth and the Restoration touched on many subjects and reflected various aspects of the life of the times. But requirements of space prevent extended discussion of this point. Suffice it to say, that, at least so far as the number of speakers involved, and the length of the entire composition, these dialogues closely resembled that described as the typical political variety.

The variety of dialogue which attained immense popularity in 1641 and the years that followed, was, as might be expected, not quite unknown before that time. Occasional dialogues may be cited which were short, involved but two speakers, lacked formal or deliberately devised setting, were colloquial or jocose in tone, and minimized characterization. In many particulars, the Martin Marprelate pamphlets, several of which were in dialogue, satisfy such a description. The rude vigor of their phrases and their enormous significance must have gone far to establish such a style as they exemplified. However, it is really striking how slight is the demonstrable connection with the past in the case of the Marprelate tracts or of those of which we have previously been speaking. The earlier dialogue, more frequently educational or religious than political, was many times a mere text book, manual of devotion, or theological disputation of the sort which

²The facts presented in this paper are drawn from the first three chapters of my dissertation, "The Non-dramatic Dialogue in English Prose before 1750," offered in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Harvard University, June, 1918.



throve to such an extent after 1681. The distinguished dialogists of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, men like Nash, Chettle, Munday, Elyot, Heywood, Sackville, and Greene, busied themselves with works of many sorts. Nicholas Breton produced no fewer than eleven dialogues, inconsiderable in substance, yet sometimes not unattractive in style, varying greatly in rapidity of conversational exchange, but always unpractical, fantastic, and extravagant. There were numerous dialogues of manners wherein were treated enclosure of lands, the plague, usury, witchcraft, gambling, the theatre, extravagance of dress and like subjects, but the manner was not that which we have remarked in the political dialogues of the Commonwealth and the Restoration. Even where it turns itself to such topics as the divorce of Henry VIII, the prospective marriage of Elizabeth and of Prince Charles, the Armada, the state of Ireland, the Siege of Ostend in 1602, the prerogative of Parliament, and the allegiance owed by subjects to their king, the dialogue is more deliberate and serious than that which followed.

There were, therefore, in the literature of the previous century, suggestions which, gathered here and there, might make possible the dialogue which we are considering; but the impetus to the combination, and the perfecting touch must have come from the needs and opportunities of contemporary politics.

A glance at the dialogue on the Continent warrants an identical conclusion. The classical dialogue of Plato, Cicero, and Lucian; the scholastic dialogue of the early fathers and the mediæval church; the religious polemics of Germany; the immensely popular dialogue literature of Italy—none of these is what we are seeking. The manner of Plato and Cicero is absurdly dissimilar. The dialogue of Lucian, despite its light and humorous tone,

and rapid exchange, is not represented with adequacy until the revival of dialogues of the dead in the early eighteenth century. The works of Sachs, Wingfield, Barlow, and Turner, closely related in certain respects to the Marprelate pamphlets, lack the numerous and continuous following in England which we like to associate with real influence. Their popularity was short-lived and restricted in extent by the lack of a real reading public: the issues they raised were temporary. Even the literature of Italy, tremendously influential upon English life in the sixteenth century, was wholly different in form and subject matter. Its conduct books influenced education rather than politics; the works of Machiavelli, Bruno, and Occhino, were large in scope and anything but popular in subject matter.

Once again we are driven for an explanation to the atmosphere of the times. In a day of public excitement, of civil discord, when party lines were growing in sharpness, when the newspaper extra was better established than the periodical itself, circumstances conspired to call the political dialogue into being. That it was of no permanent literary value is neither here nor there. It was an efficient instrument for doing what the generation wanted done, and its popularity gives it a significance as a true expression of the spirit of the times.

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